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PARENTAL DIVORCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD.

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THE BEHAVIOR OF 16 CHILDREN THREE TO FIVE YEARS OLD AT THE TIME THEIR PARENTS WERE BEING SEPARATED AND DIVORCED WAS OBSERVED IN A PRIVATE, INDEPENDENT NURSERY SCHOOL. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY WERE TO DISCOVER--(1) IF THE DIVORCE PERIOD IS A TIME OF SIGNIFICANT STRESS FOR THE CHILDREN, (2) HOW THE DIVORCE AFFECTS THE BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN, (3) HOW THE CHILD ADAPTS HIMSELF TO THE SITUATION, AND (4) HOW THE SCHOOL CAN ASSIST THE CHILD TO COPE WITH STRESSES IN THIS PERIOD. DATA WAS OBTAINED FROM THE WEEKLY ANECDOTAL RECORDS OF TEACHERS WHICH CONTAINED OBSERVATIONS OF THE CHILDREN'S PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS, PLAY, AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS. AFTER ANALYSIS, THE CHILDREN WERE DIVIDED INTO FOUR GROUPS--THE UNCHANGED, THE SAD AND ANGRY, THE LOST AND DETACHED, AND THE PSEUDO-ADULT. CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH GROUP ARE DISCUSSED. IN GENERAL, DIVORCE HAS A SERIOUS IMPACT AND REPRESENTS A MAJOR CRISIS. REGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR WAS FOLLOWED BY RESTORATION OF PREVIOUS SKILLS. BOYS SEEMED MORE VULNERABLE THAN GIRLS, AND DEMONSTRATED MORE DRAMATIC BEHAVIOR CHANGES. IT IS IMPORTANT TO IDENTIFY AND WORK WITH CHILDREN AT THIS TIME FOR PREVENTIVE PURPOSES. THE MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTANT MAY COORDINATE PREVENTIVE WORK BETWEEN THE SCHOOL AND HOME TO HELP THE CHILD. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 44TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN ORTHOPSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, WASHINGTON, D.C., MARCH, 1967. (SK)

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loyalties. To most children the loss of the father may be regarded as a desertion, provoking attitudes of deep resentment toward the mother who is perceived as responsible for sending him away.[11] Kohler[10] describes two typical tendencies of children--either they idealize the absent, withdrawn or little known parent or they tend to devalue him completely. The guilt in the child of divorce who feels that the parental break-up was caused by his own badness is well known.[7] The child's age at the time of divorce would seem to be an important consideration in determining the nature, degree and duration of the effects of the divorce. The preschool and early school years are considered to be the time when the effects are potentially the most serious.[6, 12]

Yet we also recognize another point of view--that when a family is disrupted by divorce, the divorce is not the illness but merely a symptom of the illness. The legal event itself is undoubtedly much less traumatic to all involved than the emotional divorce which has inevitably preceded it. The divorce may, in fact, relieve or even bring to an end sustained tensions of marital conflict which have spilled over into pathological parent-child relationships. Furthermore, divorce may bring hidden conflicts into the open and clearly draw the lines so that the struggle on the child of uncertainty is reduced, honest explanations can be made, and thus the divorce may paradoxically tend to promote security in a child in the long run. We recognize that many "intact" homes involve much more discordance than homes broken by divorce.

But while the divorce may clear the air and reduce strain on the child in the long run, it also operates as an acute stress in itself since it is a major change for the young child. During the divorce period the child experiences a disruption of his home, his habits and patterns, a set of regular experiences with the parents, and may be uncertain of what will become of him in spite of the best reassurances.

Currently most divorces dissolve only marriages and not families. At least half of all divorces are childless. However, since the divorce rate is highest in the first few years of marriage, the children tend to be predominantly the younger and more vulnerable children, e.g., the 3 to 5 year age group.[1] While divorce is becoming more frequent in America, and thus the number of children affected by it is rising, it should not automatically assume blame for producing "problem children" that should become a subject for closer study as a social and psychological phenomenon of our time. We need to understand this known stress factor in childhood for its effects and minimize its negative impact on children. This paper will focus on the immediate effects of divorce upon the child. The period of time immediately surrounding divorce will be examined from separation to the final decree, a trying period for all members of the family, but one which has special significance for the very young child.

What happens to the young child during this period? Obviously, divorce does not produce a single specific picture. There is a wide range of divorce experiences which will have all types and degrees of effects on children. There will be great differences among the families which have internally break apart, others in which guerilla warfare explodes and pitched battles, and still other families in which the separation occurs more gradually, each shared responsibility between the parents who spend time working out the problem with the children.

It is difficult to separate the effects of divorce from those of the prolonged trauma and strain preceding it. The child's reactions also depend upon such factors as his or her age, sex, extent and nature of family disharmony prior to the divorce, each parent's personality and previous relationship with the child, the child's relationships with siblings, as well as the emotional availability of all of these important people to him

and generally normal with one or three of the parents seeking help. The school is located in a university community, and the population is mostly, but not exclusively, white, middle class families. The total enrollment is about [illegible], divided into juvenile nursery, and elementary sections, each five days a [illegible]. The classes range in size from sixteen to thirty with an average teacher-pupil ratio of one to ten. The teachers maintain ongoing anecdotal records on all their children at weekly intervals (observations of personality characteristics, play and relationships) and any significant changes are recorded as they happen. The records of eleven children age three to five, ten boys and six girls, whose parents were separated and divorced during their nursery experience (1956-1958) were examined. During the period surrounding the final separation and legal divorce, changes in children's behavior from previous levels and from those of the group were noted by the teachers and recorded. In one case there was what appeared to be [illegible] prior to divorce but a child was withdrawn after [illegible]. Each of these children were in the same school group. While [illegible] conditions were involved in assisting the teachers in working with many of these children, two of those in the series also had direct contact with mental health clinics for psychiatric evaluation during the one to two year period the group was followed, and one of these children was treated in outpatient psychotherapy.

The limitations of this study are well recognized and should be emphasized. 1) The data were collected anonymously with no attempt to evaluate the behavior of individual family conflicts and there was no long-range follow-up. The only cases in which details of family relationships were obtained were those which were in or on the psychiatric consultant's help were actively sought by [illegible]. 2) The sample is small and atypical. 3) Similar changes [illegible] which these parents were not divorced; furthermore, the changes

The children in this study are divided into two groups according to the classification of behavior and the circumstances of adjustment. Each group will be discussed briefly.

[illegible]

First of all we will discuss the three children whose behavior did not [illegible] to the school personnel or change during the divorce period--the boys [illegible]. This is not to say that they were unaffected by the divorce, but only that changes because their adaptive techniques seemed more highly developed [illegible]. It may very well be that the problems were handled so satisfactorily at home, that guilt, blame and anger had been participated, handled, and worked through there in such a manner that behavioral derivatives did not appear [illegible]. The children's relationships with each parent seemed to be a solid one during the time they were on good terms with each parent following the divorce. [illegible] but the process of separation lasted of necessity and [illegible]. The boy [illegible] on handling the children and [illegible] of making him suffer by different children's gifts for his [illegible], until the point the children were making a joint present or [illegible]. The parents are on very friendly and cook turns driving [illegible] to and from school during and after the divorce. Another child seemed able to [illegible] concerns exceptionally well. Once, while the group was discussing different kinds of puppy dogs she announced a great discovery: "Do you know that not all married people love each other!" Subtle readjustments in personal [illegible] were noted in the boy who no longer wanted to be called by his nickname, a nonsense abbreviation, insisting "Pierre will be Pierre because that is [illegible]."

[illegible] children had previously been described as well-adjusted, [illegible] and cooperative in the group. A good example was [illegible], during the period of his parents' divorce, demonstrated

Dear Mrs. Abby Lundof:

Your group (eight children, seven born and one girl, two terrors and [illegible] usually see their mother with a(n) [illegible] depression [illegible] and aggressive, blaming others for [illegible] problems [illegible] a situation in school work normally perceived to be [illegible] [illegible], and typically experienced anger and [illegible] of grief, [illegible] and explosive. Typically, they become possessive, surly, [illegible] and [illegible], hoarding and occasionally biting people as [illegible] to pre[illegible] [illegible] the child would [illegible] believe, become alarmed by his own actions [illegible] so [illegible] that he didn't know why he did it. Another child began [illegible] [illegible] in his or her backyard. Several of the more [illegible] or [illegible] may include a former close friend from a favorite game, and [illegible] the friend devastated by it. This child, a four year old boy, [illegible] [illegible] [illegible], has, in many respects, more or [illegible] [illegible] in this group. My notes [illegible] [illegible] [illegible], [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

[illegible] through his aggressive behavior and he thus opened the way for others to [illegible] their feelings.

The children in this group demonstrated a depression which disrupted their play in an even more marked degree. They were characterized by giving up and not [illegible], eventually led finally to digital depression. In these children the loss of [illegible] to play creatively seemed part of a vicious cycle preventing the [illegible] overcoming this depression which itself was interwoven with his super[illegible]. Extreme boredom and inhibition was typically seen during "free [illegible]" activity was left up to the child. Early, free periods [illegible] typically, "What can I do, I can't think of anything to draw" [illegible] to eliminate feelings in dissociated play methods, there [illegible] gravitated to chaotic work which reflected their dilemma in its con[illegible] of a confusion. Pictures drawn were typically of a boy looking for his [illegible] was lost him, or a girl who had lost her way home. In fact, the art [illegible] by the more seriously affected children for a period of several [illegible] or more months, a place where things were left unfinished and only later [illegible] resumed attractive again.

Typically these children could no longer play creatively and enjoy listening [illegible] as they once had, particularly those requiring fairly sophisticated such [illegible] and the Three Bears. There would be a great deal of checking to [illegible] which many family words were used and an uncertainty the need to [illegible] by illustrators as how real and to announce to everyone what [illegible]

[illegible] three expressed love between and among family play to animals [illegible] from playing house were asked to be a family member, running [illegible] by pretend a family role her then would plead to the [illegible] [illegible] would be allowed to play in the house, seeking his [illegible] [illegible] but not one [illegible] such [illegible]

about their health and manners as well as the rules of the game. The teacher said of one of them, "It is sometimes difficult to remember that she is the youngest child in the group as her behavior seems so child-like."

One explanation of these characteristics is to view them as a kind of [illegible] with a part of the mother that has heightened meaning for the [illegible] on distance-closeness often considered characteristic of [illegible] personality in adults. It may represent a premature, sudden [illegible] of personality traits with which they had been experimenting. [illegible] with a caricature of the mother whose husband could not find [illegible] within in her, the "superior, nagging wife" who is always right. In [illegible] on identification with the "wife of the husband who leaves home" [illegible] with the more positive qualities in the mother expressed in crises [illegible] and then as whole women. These girls seemed to be reacting not so much [illegible] to life as how and the personal fears of life [illegible] [illegible] the mothers signified [illegible] difficulties. The more [illegible] as a way of holding together and to insure the mother's [illegible] of [illegible] [illegible]. One crucial question with [illegible] is how typical or unusual such a picture becomes, that [illegible] [illegible] as well as external manifestations.

Such delayed identifications noted here clearly evident in the [illegible] behavior of the boys who completed the previously described angry, [illegible] set is possible that their behavior was represented the part of [illegible] perceived with heightened intensity at the time, the clustering [illegible]-parent figures on the passive pleasing former playing at house. Boys [illegible] are in the process of rebuilding their object of identification from [illegible] to the mother to the father and we would expect that his love [illegible] is related to [illegible] childhood dependence in addition to [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]. These seemed to be

possible that some children behaved so differently at home, and found release from their conflicted feelings at school, it seems more likely that in many cases acute changes in children at this time would be hidden to teachers. There may be a tendency toward pitying or unblaming reactions at the issue of divorce by the teacher because of her understanding in her dealings with the child by herself. It was surprising to hear certain teachers say that their child had not talked much about the father's absence, as if the child did not even notice the teacher's leaving or anything more than another business trip. Of course the child's denial and refusal to talk about it had not happened at all by this time for some, and perhaps the silence and unspoken feelings between a mother and parental loss between mother and child with all its implications for the future. If the mother either ignores or denies the child's reaction, and is then reinforced that the husband did not really exist as a member of the family, then she need not feel a responsibility to face the problem of readjustment for the child or herself without him.

Teachers in many instances unconsciously reinforced what they saw as the mother's denial of the situation by not asking questions about the father, or by not referring to him in class discussions. Teachers would often avoid any mention of their own divorces, neither admitting and ignoring the possibility that anybody actually is separated. It seemed critically important that teachers become aware that the lives of the children had been drastically disrupted. Divorce would be seen as a way of killing teachers which could double the pain for them. It was said as a means of dealing with angry and depressive feelings so that adult support could be found during this period of family and personal upheaval, which was often accompanied by a temporary disruption of mind-functioning and ability. Moderate-to-severe disruptions, and pronounced anxiety with adult personality problems were frequently overlooked indefinitely.

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